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ABSTRACT

In 1985, Vassar College undertook a project to promote the transfer of two-year college students by providing a select group of community college students with the opportunity to experience learning in an independent, residential setting, while offering the support and assessment resources needed to aid them in using this experience to plan for their educational futures. From 50 applicants, 26 students from five community colleges were selected on the basis of their academic records, recommendations, and submitted essays. One third of the students were Black, one third were of Hispanic origin, and the remainder were White. Concurrent with the student recruitment effort, three team-taught introductory courses in cognitive science, American literature, and human ecology were devised. Support staff for the students included a director, a writing specialist, a specialist in academic computing, and two "student fellows." All of the students were successful both in their coursework, with grades ranging from A to C+, and in their social adjustment to what was for many their first communal and residential experience. Student evaluations revealed however that the 4-week duration of the program was too short to accomplish all that had been planned. The success of the program is evidenced by the fact that all 26 of the initial students had either transferred to four-year institutions or were planning to transfer. (RO)

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VASSAR COLLEGE'S
REPORT TO THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES
AND THE ANDREW W. MELLON FOUNDATION

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June 9, 1986

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REPORT TO THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES

AND THE ANDREW W. MELLON FOUNDATION

June 9,1986

Our effort at Vassar in promoting exploration of transfer from community colleges has centered on a program, begun last summer partly with the AAC/ Mellon grant, which will continue this year with additional support from other sources. The basic concerns of the program are, first, that many two-year college students who might most appropriately continue and complete their undergraduate work in independent and residential, liberal arts settings, fail to do so and, second, that of those who do, far too few are minority students. We suspected that major impediments to the successful transfer of these students were their radical unfamiliarity with most elements of the educational environment and experience represented by a school such as Vassar and the real inability of even the most informed counseling and of the best written information to address this problem. Our plan was, first, to identify this constituency in selected community colleges and then to provide a group of these students with the opportunity to experience for themselves learning in an independent, residential setting, along with the particular supports and assessment resources needed to aid them in using this experience to plan for their educational futures.

Naturally, I wish to report gratifying successes --for our theoretical assumptions, for several Vassar constituencies and for a number of fine young people-- and I will do so in some little detail. But I will also, both because you have invited it but also because they are no doubt more instructive, note a number of lacks or failures in our approach and our experiment which we are trying to address in its second and third years.

The Students

Guidance counselors, the heads of honors programs and others at five community colleges in the Hudson valley and at LaGuardia Community College in Queens were asked to come to the campus early last spring to discuss our concerns and to assist us in identifying the students for last summer's experimental program. The criteria developed in those meetings were that the students should not only show strong academic ability and energy but that they should have some interest in eventual study or careers which implicated liberal arts training. In addition, we agreed that students whose own experience or backgrounds included significant exposure to or familiarity with residential, liberal education would not be included in the program. Minority students were particularly to be sought and LaGuardia, where minority students make up 60-70% of the student body, was expected to supply at least half of the students.

We have collaborated for several years with LaGuardia and the anticipated courses were to be team-taught by Vassar and LaGuardia faculty, and thus identification of good potential students there went fairly smoothly. Among the counselors from the Hudson valley, however, some wariness marked our talks. As there was clearly some transfer implication in these plans, I had asked an admissions officer to attend the initial meeting and I was troubled to see that she was immediately under fire from some of the guests. Our broader interests seemed hard for a couple of them to believe and the "bottom line" perception of what we were proposing --as an admissions ploy to a constituency the College had flirted with before-- was equally hard for them to shake. A certain protectiveness, often characteristic, I gather, to discussions between these two professional groups, marred the talks and the subsequent application process. As a species of "town" and "gown" friction, such tension is of course always bad, but there was a more disturbing element in this matter if active collaboration with our efforts

seemed to some community college people to be ceding to Vassar a valuable asset of the community college and/or setting up certain expectations or appetites in students which we couldn't, over time, satisfy. Clearly, although our efforts to attract the appropriate group of students were ultimately successful, we needed to find ways to make clearer our hope to assist counselors in the community colleges in developing and strengthening an important and rather ignored institutional constituency --not their few, clearly baccalaureate-bound "stars," but a more tentative and unformed group which is clearly equally deserving. And, curiously, we need also to make clearer to the counselors and mentors of this group the range of support of all sorts available to these students on our campus and campuses like ours.

Ultimately, about fifty applications were received from five colleges and at a meeting in April, the faculty members who would be teaching in the program chose twenty-six students, based on their records, on recommendations and on essays they submitted which addressed their educational experiences and expectations. One third of the students were Black, one third were of Hispanic origin and the remainder were White; about half were from LaGuardia and half were from upstate and the group was three-quarters female. They ranged in age from 18 to 33 and their average age was 21.

Courses, Staff and Support

Concurrent with our recruitment of students, three Vassar faculty members and three members of the Faculty at LaGuardia had been meeting together to devise three team-taught courses for the summer. The courses were to be in all ways commensurate with introductory courses at Vassar, both in range and in approach: they were to be truly introductory to a field or discipline integral in the liberal arts curriculum; and they were to be limited in enrollment to eighteen students, both so that the collegiate class

"feel" could be maintained and so that frequent attention could be paid in them to written and oral expression. The courses naturally needed also to be acceptable both toward fulfillment of the community college degree requirements and to our own and they needed, of course, to meet all the specifications of New York State.

The courses were an introductory course in Cognitive Science on "The Science and Practice of Thinking," an American Literature course entitled "Conflict and Celebration in American Writing," and an interdisciplinary course in "human ecology" called "Environmental Impacts: Technology, Resources and Human Values" taught by an environmental biologist from Vassar and an economist and information systems specialist from LaGuardia. Each student enrolled in two of the three courses and each course met each day for two hours over the course of four weeks.

Support staff for the students included a director --our Advisor to Minority Students, who is also the Director of the Academic Resource Center at Vassar-- a writing specialist from the Center, a specialist in academic computing from the Microcomputer Resource Center and two "student fellows," a young man who had just graduated, having transferred to Vassar from Hunter, and a young Junior woman who had been a LaGuardia transfer the previous year. All the usual resources of the College, from the Library and Field House to the Dining Center and the College Store were available to the students, whose entire costs, including texts and other class materials, were covered by the program.

Results and More Lessons

The students were completely successful in their course work. Grades ranged from A to C+ --a little higher than our usual range-- and each student now has a Vassar transcript showing the equivalent of 7 semester hours of credit earned. As important as

the record of work completed, however, is the appreciation of the several aspects of collegiate, liberal education in these courses which the students' formal and informal evaluations reflect. About the literature course, for example, one student said: "It allowed people to discuss American literature in a friendly, academic setting. The points of view of both teachers added stimulus and insights." More general appreciation is reflected in another student's comment: "[the program] has opened the door for me to get a glimpse of what a four year college academic work load is like. I may not get the grades I want, but I think that just being under pressure and having the teachers so near makes it worthwhile."

As the month went along, the degree of the instructors' satisfaction might have been anticipated, but the several kinds of satisfaction were not. "What a delight our students were!" one team of teachers reported. "They were outspoken, direct, inquisitive, eager, prepared for class, attentive, industrious and enthusiastic.... Our greatest reward was in watching students grow and mature over these four short weeks. The transformations in some cases were astonishing." Another team, while praising their students' "impressive grades...after a rigorous sequence of twenty, two-hour seminars, group work, numerous oral presentations and four, five-page papers," went on to note that "one of the primary incentives for participating in this program was the opportunity it offered for working with a faculty member from another kind of institution." While this report isn't about the several faculty development aspects of this program, I must note one Vassar colleague's observation that he'd had, as a result of his work last summer, to review his usual approach to teaching. He observed that he had apparently gradually accommodated into each class presentation the likelihood that one or another member of the class had missed the preceding class and that one or more in attendance

were not fully prepared; "It's been a little difficult to adjust," he told me, "to teaching a class where everybody was here last time and everybody's prepared for today."

The social accommodation of the students was also, on balance, very successful. We were very fortunate in our choice of "student fellows," as our experience during the regular terms with a considerable number of students from similar backgrounds had hardly prepared us for the broad lack of communal, academic and residential experience represented in this group as a whole. A surprising number of students had never lived away from home and, of course, none had lived in a dormitory. For the New York City students, the simple quiet of a campus of over a thousand acres was initially unsettling.

Still, both in their conversations with us when they have returned to the campus and in their written evaluations as the program ended, many students apparently feel that learning to live and work together was one of their greatest challenges and accomplishments in the summer's experience. While one of the "student fellows," the transfer from Hunter, observed that "much of the credit for the development of comradeship between students should be given to the students themselves," he and his colleague probably gave more than they suspected. She, for example, gives evidence in her report of having been a model counselor: "Students understood that they could talk to me about a problem and that I would do the best I could to help them. Sometimes the solution was telling them about my own experience. Other times the solution was to tell them to seek faculty help." I am glad that she will be with the program again this year.

While the students were universally successful in their course work, we learned several things from their experience which we have used in planning the work for this

summer. First, almost every evaluation by the students, both at the time they left the campus and at our follow-up meeting and "reunion" in January, pointed out that the four weeks were "just too short" to accomplish all that we had set out to do. While we met the State's regulations and while we met our own high expectations for the outcome of the individual courses, we did so at a cost to the comfort and pleasure of the students in their work and to our expectations that auxiliary skills and interests might by developed and that larger, underlying questions might be addressed.

A schedule of writing workshops,for example, had to be abandoned almost as soon as classes began because the press of the students' obligations and their need for assistance with them gave no room for more general assessment and assistance. Similarly, the uses students could make of the microcomputing facilities of the campus or of the other facilities on the academic mainframe were almost entirely limited to those which served immediate class needs. While time and good advice quickly eased much of the self-imposed duress which often found students staying up half the night re-reading assignments out of fear that they ought nearly to memorize them to be prepared for their morning classes, little time was ever found for these more general tasks and virtually none was found for the evaluating and advising for the future which we hoped would allow the students to leave the program with the beginnings of sound personal plans, based on good advice on transfer admissions, financial aid and academic goals.

These latter concerns are particularly troubling to address with this group of students. With very little experience to draw on and thus not much of the vocabulary to begin with, raising these questions in any kind of orientation is pointless and, probably, only confusing and worrying them further about matters they need not and can not do much about. The vocabulary and the dialogue need to begin as the experience comes

along and that takes time and individualized attention from the appropriate professionals. This summer, we plan for courses to extend over five weeks, with classes on only four days and with workshops and field trips scheduled for Wednesdays. A comprehensive and carefully planned program of individual and group advising sessions will address this range of questions as the program goes along.

The final evaluation of our efforts in this program to date must certainly rest upon the prospects of the students who participated as they plan for their academic futures. It is most gratifying to be able to report that nearly all of the initial twenty-six students have either transferred to four-year institutions or are planning to transfer and I am particularly happy to be welcoming one of the LaGuardia students to Vassar in the Fall. I was equally pleased to note the sense of enablement in one student's comment before a large audience at LaGuardia's "Traditions Dinner" at the Waldorf-Astoria last winter, that she knew as a result of last summer that she had a place at Vassar but, because of her family responsibilities, that was not her choice: "I'm going to NYU and I'm going to be an engineer." And I felt our program had been successful for another young woman when, after several students at our "reunion" in January had mentioned the program's having shown them they had abilities that hadn't suspected they possessed, she admitted that, for her, it had confirmed what she'd often thought about her potential but had ignored: "It taught me I'd better get my act together and get on with it."

But we still have much to accomplish as advisors and as assistors in the placement process. In addition to the workshops on transfer and financial aid I have mentioned above, we need also to counsel students about the kinds of choices within four-year institutions which may be open to them. A larger number of the LaGuardia students, for example, have transferred to Hunter than would seem appropriate and a few of them

transferred after their first year and a summer with us. Certainly, we don't wish to make our program an agent for, as a LaGuardia colleague only partly jokingly put it, skimming their best students for Hunter!

The whole financial side of the program needs more work than we had thought would be necessary. Part of our financial planning had been based on New York State's very generous Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), which adjusts in proportion not only to students' needs but to the costs at the institutions --within the state-- that they attend. We found, however, that financial aid offices at community colleges, where there might theoretically be a greater percentage of needy students, were really not well-informed about such matters as "adjusting TAP," and, moreover, guidance counselors were wary of recommending the assignment of TAP monies to work in our program, fearing that students would "run short" as they neared the end of their degree work. This is not, of course, a real worry, both because the courses in the program apply directly to their two-year degree requirements and because, once accepted and aided by a four year institution such as Vassar, students don't "run short" of aid for a course or two, but often are aided for second majors, ninth semesters and even fifth years.

For this year, we have come to see that much more financial aid expertise needs to be supplied from our side than we had imagined and we have set about to do that. In the matter, however, of financing part of the program from the Pell money to which each of the students is entitled, we have no real solution. Since Pell monies are paid directly to students and since, in many cases, they support the students' studies by supplementing their life at home, few students are willing to "pay out" these funds to a distant, elite and well-endowed place they've never seen. In this way, although the sums in question are not great, we are once again learning that the program we are evolving is

a more complex model than we imagined.

Prospects

Vassar is committed for the foreseeable future to the development and continuation of the summer program for community college students. We have sought and are continuing to seek funding to continue it beyond next year and we see, both in the collaboration which is developing with the community colleges and in the active involvement of students, administration and faculty, both at Vassar and at the community colleges, encouraging signs of vitality. One of the faculty members from last year is returning this summer, another will be assisting in the administration and evaluation of this year's program and the other three of the original six have expressed interest in participation in future years. I am delighted that colleagues from Vassar and LaGuardia will be joined this year by a member of the Faculty at Ulster County Community College and I am sorry that we were unable to place a member of the Dutchess Community College Faculty who applied among this summer's teachers.

I am sorry also that another of our hopes for this summer has not been realized. In speaking of this program during the year of its formation, both to alumnae/i and to colleagues at schools like Vassar --Brown, Connecticut, Dartmouth, Oberlin, Wesleyan-- I was encouraged to think that we might engage a teacher from one or more or these schools in working in the program. Thus, although the intricacies of each state's two-year college system might need to be individually addressed, our program's purpose and practice might spread across state lines where, I was encouraged to believe, there was both need and enthusiasm for it. Unhappily and despite my colleagues' cooperation, our assurance of funding for this summer came about too late for faculty members' planning to allow for their participation. Securing this cross-fertilization for next summer as well

as expanding the program to a full fifty students are our two top priorities for enhancement of the program.

In the meantime, less than a week from now, about thirty-five community college students will begin their summer studies at Vassar, each enrolled in two of four team-taught courses. Over a five-week period, we hope that the success of these students, drawn from three community colleges and, again, mainly minority students, will be at least equal to that of the students in last year's program and I look forward to learning from my colleagues in the AAC/Mellon project of ways in which to assist them in realizing this goal.

Colton Johnson
Dean of Studies
Vassar College

Vassar College

Summer program for Community College Students

1986

Course Descriptions

The following courses will be offered in the Summer Program for Community College Students this year. Please read each course description carefully and discusss your choices with your academic advisor. Then, on the Course Selection Form provided, mark your first, second and third choices and return the form by June 10 to:

Karen Getter
Program for Community College Students
Box 294, Vassar College
Poughkeepsie NY 12601

Biology and Ethics:Genetic Engineering.
Instructors: Robert F. Steuding, Ulster County Community College
J. William Straus, Vassar College

This course focuses on the biological principals and ethical implications of genetic engineering. After inspecting the basic foundations of genetics, we examine how scientists manipulate genes and we look at the questions raised by such experimentation regarding the potential changes in society, in the quality of life and in what it means to be human. One of the required readings will be Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Community Studies
Instructors: Harvey K. Flad, Vassar College
John Hyland, LaGuardia Community College

This course examines the concept of community in America. It questions the prevailing doctrine of decline by looking at how community is manifested through various factors, such as social class and ethnicity; in different types of social organization, such as the workplace or neighborhood; and at scales of analysis ranging from the small town to large urban places. Methodological approaches include documentary films, urban ethnographies, case studies and field trips to observe specific communities in the Hudson Valley. Each student investigates a specific topic, such as housing or community organization, through field work in the local area.

Computing as a Resource
Instructor: Douglas Hedges, Vassar College
assisted by Colton Johnson, Vassar College

The computer and its several techniques constitute the greatest innovation in learning, at least, in this century. This course is an introduction to computers and computing fundamentals in both user applications and programming. Particular emphasis is given to current trends in microcomputing and much of the material introduced in lecture is realized through self-scheduled laboratory work. Writing assignments include personal essays as well as projects focusing on particular software programs and participation in an "electronic conference" on the main academic computer.

Literature and Politics
Instructors: Obika Gray, Vassar College
Gilbert Muller, LaGuardia Community College

This course introduces students to the ways in which political concepts and concerns are reflected in literary works. Such major twentieth century authors as Orwell, Fanon, Lamming, Camus and Achebe will be examined. The perspective of the course is global and intercultural, with authors selected from Europe, Africa and the Americas. Key literary and political themes include colonialism, nationalism, political systems, cultural domination and theories of liberation.

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